

## **(Height, Density, Public Hearings)**

One week after Sarasota City officials covertly pushed through an expensive replacement of the Van Wezel, they're at it again.

This **Wednesday, April 13 at 1:30 pm** in City Hall Chambers at 1565 1<sup>st</sup> Street, Sarasota, the City Planning Board will hold their public hearing on several Comprehensive Plan Amendments pushed by City Planning Director Steve Cover to drop the reins on development.

They include changes – among other bad ones -- to:

- Eliminate all limits on building heights in downtown districts (Core, Bayfront and Edge).
- Eliminate all limits on density in downtown districts for any development in which even one unit of “attainable housing” is included.
- Replace Planning Board and City Commission public hearings and approvals with “administrative approval” for a development anywhere in the City when even one unit of “attainable housing” is provided.

The proposed amendments may be reviewed

at: [https://sarasota.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view\\_id=84&event\\_id=5500&meta\\_id=714028](https://sarasota.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=84&event_id=5500&meta_id=714028)

There are also Zoning Code amendments on the agenda, which further reduce development limits in other major ways.

“Attainable housing” is defined in the City’s Comprehensive Plan as 120% of Area Median Income. In 2021, that was \$92,640, which allows a maximum mortgage of \$392,094 or a maximum rent of \$23,316. Hardly what we consider affordable housing, and just an excuse to drop the reins on growth. At a recent meeting, City Commissioner Kyle Battie (who usually favors developers) told Cover that granting height and density increases in return for housing in that price range was “hijacking affordable housing” as an empty excuse for developer giveaways.

The elimination of limits on building heights is explained by Cover as eliminating a redundancy with the Zoning Code. However, if they are removed from the Comprehensive Plan they will lose the protection in the City Charter which requires a Supermajority Vote of the City Commission (at least 4 to 1) to increase them. Also, Zoning Code amendments are much easier than Comprehensive Plan Amendments, which require approval at two City Commission meetings months apart and state review. In a City where major changes for vested interests are sought to be slipped through with little public notice, this would be a bad change indeed. Already, City Commissioners Hagen Brody and Liz Alpert have called for major increases in building heights, and Kyle Battie tends to follow them for developers, so the risk is great indeed.

Planning Director Steve Cover first proposed such changes to the City Commission on April 19, 2021, and got a 3 to 2 approval to conduct a year of public “input” sessions to gauge community reaction to his proposals. After strong initial blowback however, Cover delayed and ultimately canceled that

approach. Now — almost exactly one year later — he is instead opting for stealth in sneaking through his proposed changes, buried in a 170-page package and not described in the Planning Board Agenda.

This is truly an **Under Cover scheme** to **destroy the charm that makes so Sarasota appealing to so many new residents and businesses, as well as those of us here today, by replacing it with development out of control** to benefit Commissioners' contributors rather than their constituents.

At that meeting one year ago, **Cover told the City Commission that we should cease being "Any City USA" and create an "exciting skyline" with buildings like the Sears Tower in Chicago.** Pro-developer City Commissioner Hagen Brody responded to objections from existing residents by saying, "We can't be guided by comments like, 'Don't block my view.'"

Cover also suggested that a huge increase in urban heights and densities is an alternative to urban sprawl. That of course ignores that development of rural lands is in the hands of the County Commission and is not likely to say no to sprawl developers just because the City treats Sarasota like a sardine can. Doing what Cover wants will just mean overdevelopment everywhere, with traffic nightmares and the other consequents of growth out of control.

This follows Cover's pattern as former Planning Director for Arlington, Virginia, where he was lauded by developers for such "streamlining" of approvals and for a more lax enforcement policy.

Developers recently sought to include repeal of the Supermajority requirement for building height increases from the City Charter but the Charter Review Committee reversed its approval of that amendment upon hearing protests from the public, and it is not included.

**The City Planning Board should delay its consideration of these very bad Comprehensive Plan amendments in order to give the public and public interest groups a chance to properly become informed and weigh in on this radical effort to change the shape and character of our community.**

Please show up Wednesday and speak at the public hearing. Also, please email Planning Board members to let them know your opposition to approval — particularly rushed approval — of these terrible changes. Even if you are not a City of Sarasota resident, if you visit, work or shop here, or drive in the vicinity, you have a right to be heard.